

Your imagination and Lake Wingra

LAKE WINGRA is not exactly a wilderness lake. It is light-years from the Quetico and no loons cry here at all.

It is also adjacent to an old-fashioned zoo, to a new-fangled Catholic educational complex of some proportion and to all those charming old-timey constructions with the thick walls and the thin plumbing that are forever qualifying for the Alternate Parade of Homes.

Its waters often look like something that came off the Mautz color chart.

Its weed growth is so awesome that one reputable scientist calls it "The Sargasso Sea — West". Its gunk-filled surface on occasion resembles the stagnant slips of the ore unloading docks at Gary and South Chicago.

BUT LITTLE LAKE Wingra is a sleeper. As a matter of fact, in its own ingratiating way, little Lake Wingra is a gem.

It is spring-fed. Much of its marsh filter system remains intact. And its burgeoning itty-bitty bluegill popula-

tion supports a blackbass fishery that boggles the mind.

"The state record largemouth," a fisher friend of mine insists, "will come out of Wingra. Unless, it dies of old age first."

Wingra, more than any body of water in these parts, will give you a wilderness-like experience if you let it.

I let it everytime things press in and I just can't get the blue canoe up to the Wolf, the Flambeau or to the magical far-away rivers that all run North.

Lake Wingra is not just a body of water, it is, if you will, a state of mind.

Whenever the blue canoe is floating there, I am not just paddling in that little puddle, I am paddling in the past as well.

WE WENT OVER the other day with our daughter, Donna, fresh from her first year of college at Grinnell.

We clipped the canoe to the top of the wagon with the four stretchy cables — the things Maurie Ellis calls "rubber ropes" — stuck in the two Clement paddles, two life preservers

North Country notebook

by George Vukelich

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and a single spinning rod, just in case.

Stopped for the light at Regent and Allen, I remembered all the times young Jerry Schmidt would pause here, portaging from his home on Van Hise to his put-in on Wingra, peering out from his shell like a migrating turtle surprised out on dry ground.

He waited patiently for the WALK sign and then would go marching off to that different drummer most of us could barely hear. We watched him, wondered about him, and waited not so patiently for those dumb red lights to change so that we could get to work and to all the other dumb places that really don't seem so important, or smart, anymore.

Jerry Schmidt is gone away now, employed by the U.S. Park Service this season as the official park photo-

grapher in Yellowstone so I have a hunch he doesn't miss portaging on the West Side as much as the West Side misses him.

WE PUT THE BLUE canoe in at the stone bridge.

A young man was fishing in the green soup for bluegills. He caught one as we pulled out and added it to the two dozen in his wire basket. They were small but when it comes to bluegill filets, small is beautiful as old crunchy Euell Gibbons used to imply.

I gave the young man a conspiratorial nod and received one right back. People who fill up on small bluegills are serious fisherfolk who know where the good eating is and only a fool dismisses little fish as "too small to filet."

You might as leave dismiss morel

gatherers or blueberry pickers or other gourmet collectors of little treats.

WE PADDED UP the Edgewood shore, off the reeds where Randy Olson and I had jigged for largemouth bass on all those dazzling winter afternoons, watching the January crows picking the eyes out of discarded stripers far out on the ice.

Donna counted and said there were 25 sailboats on the lake. They were mostly Bats and Hawks and other rentals along with some Sunfish and a Sail. But they were scattered around and silent and not disturbing at all. And the same was true of the handful of rental canoes with their bright red paddles.

We sat, barefoot, in our shorts and paddled into the sparkling sunlight.

Past the teeming piers of the boat livery, past the beckoning lagoon, past the song-filled western marsh.

By the time we turned back into the wind and headed down the far shore, we could no longer see the depressing zoo where the otters made do with water not much bigger than a birdbath.

We could barely hear the buzz

from the yellow beach where the muscular young men sat on the hoods of the muscle cars, sipping a cool one, checking out the action on the crowded sand, knowing, perhaps, that the Open Horizon was really closed by the Nakoma golf course.

WE WERE BEGINNING to smell the sunlight and see the wind. Out in the canoe, we could as well have been in Canada.

I closed my eyes and could see Sandy Nate on the Wabassi River where the brookies ran 4 to 5 pounds and the water not only looked like gin but tasted even better.

This sun on my eyelids, hot and wine red, was the same sun I had felt then with Sandy in the stern promising that he would burn his funky bush pants if I would burn my funky wool socks once we got to Ogoki Post on the Albany.

We did that one wild night outside the Hudson Bay Store across from the Cree village and then after we got back to Madison, we heard that Sandy had been guiding a Government Survey team and drowned when a sudden storm caught them

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on an open lake and they had capsized.

I opened my eyes and Sandy Nate was gone. Another time I would see him again. As I would see all the others. Jim Nania. Bob Kneebone. Russ Colvin. Father Joe Himmelsbach. Even the Old Man himself.

And Donna in the bow, with her poet's eye, what did she see? Long-lost canoe companions? Vanquished friends? Vanished enemies? ? I don't know. I didn't ask. But I think not. No. Not yet. Not enough has gone by yet. Not enough water. Not enough wind. Not enough time. But one day, a day inexorably approaching the horizon even now... one day...

I WATCHED THE strong tanned back of the Old Man's grand-daughter leaning into her stroke, a part of him, a part of this magical canoe.

In the soft wind, I could almost hear the Old Man's voice as I always heard it up north when the walleyes began to hit and the fish felt heavy.

"Georgi," the voice seemed to be whispering. "When you get to be our age, angels talk to you."